Grammar Worksheets:  Excessive Nominalizations, Answers and Teaching Tips

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In this sheet we discuss, albeit briefly, a problem addressed beautifully by the late Professor Joseph M. Williams, of the University of Chicago. He spent a great portion of his life examining the principles of clear writing. He distilled his teachings into a book, Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace, 9th ed., Pearson, 2007. This worksheet owes much to Williams’s work.

**Nominalizations:** A sentence may seem unclear to a reader because verbs and adjectives (words that describe nouns) are turned into nouns. In Williams’s words, “A noun derived from a verb or adjective has a technical name: nominalization” (Williams, 38).

**Avoid Making Nouns from Verbs**

Take a look at the sentences below.

1. A **re-examination** of the evidence led prosecutors to a **reconsideration** of the defendant’s guilt.
2. Prosecutors **re-examined** the evidence and **reconsidered** the defendant’s guilt.

Most readers would say that sentence (b) is clearer than (a). The words re-examination and reconsideration are nouns. Generally, words that end in **tion** are nouns. In Williams’s terminology, these words are nominalizations.

The verb forms, re-examined and reconsidered, seem clearer to most readers. The following table lists just a very few nominalizations and their corresponding verb forms.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Nominalization** | **Verb Form** |
| Analysis | Analyze |
| Belief | Believe |
| Comparison | Compare |
| Conclusion | Conclude |
| Determination | Determine |
| Failure | Fail |
| Reaction | React |
| Suggestion | Suggest |

In general, choose the verb form over the nominalization. But be careful. Some nominalizations are useful and necessary. Use them prudently.

**Avoid Making Nouns from Adjectives**

The same principle applies with adjectives. Avoid turning an adjective, such as careless, into its corresponding nominalization, carelessness.

Avoid: His **carelessness** in driving caused a multi-car accident.

Prefer: His **careless** driving caused a multi-car accident.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Nominalization** | **Adjective Form** |
| Carelessness | Careless |
| Difficulty | Difficult |
| Intensity | Intense |

Ken Bresler treats the topic of nominalizations quite well, including useful nominalizations, in his article, “Just Say Know.” Take a look. <http://www.clearwriting.com/know.htm>

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**Exercises: Rewrite each sentence. Turn any unnecessary nominalization into its corresponding verb or adjective.**

1.  The steering committee raised an objection to the proposed parking garage north of the stadium.

**General Teaching Tips:** Students have a tough time with this worksheet because the sentences sound okay to them, and there are no grammatical errors.

Take a sentence, # 1 for example, and have the students count the number of words. Sentence #1 has 15 words. Have the students circle the words that end in “tion” or “cion.” These words are usually nouns, and sometimes they can be converted to verbs.

In sentence 1, the word “objection” ends in “tion.” Ask them if the “tion” word has a verb equivalent. In this case, the verb equivalent is “object.”

Rewrite the sentence with the agent (the doer of the action) as the subject, and the main action as the verb. “The steering committee objected to the proposed parking garage north of the stadium.”

Ask the students to count the words in the revised sentence: 13.

Going from 15 words to 13 is a good thing (stress “less is more”), and getting rid of a weak verb, like “raised” and converting a nominalization (“objection”) to a verb, help make the sentence easier to understand.

**Revised**: The steering committee objected to the proposed parking garage north of the stadium.

 2.  When the faculty senate has made a determination about the desirability of a lecture series, a proposal will be presented to the chancellor. (Hint. Perhaps we have ONE useful nominalization.)

**Revised:** When the faculty senate determines the desirability of a lecture series, a proposal will be presented to the chancellor.

**Teaching Tip:** Some students will want to convert the main clause from passive to active. That’s okay. Some may even take the noun “proposal” and turn it into a verb, “propose.” Encourage this, but don’t dwell on it.

**Revised**: When the faculty senate determines the desirability of a lecture series, it will propose the idea to the chancellor.

**Revised:** When the faculty senate determines that a lecture series is desirable, it will propose the idea to the chancellor.

**Teaching Tip:** This last sentence does not add much, but some students write it. That’s fine.

3. Negligence on the part of hospital workers was the reason for the failure of the kidney machine.

**Teaching Tip:** Students can take the word “Negligence,” a noun, and convert it to an adjective. They can also take the word “failure,” a noun, and convert it to “fail,” a verb.

The more creative students will eliminate “the reason for” and replace it with “because.” Encourage this. Some students will also want to use the verb “break” – past tense broke – to convey the entire idea very succinctly, as in this revised example.

**Revised**: Negligent hospital workers broke the kidney machine.

**Revised:** The kidney machine broke because of negligent hospital workers.

**Revised:** Negligent hospital workers caused the kidney machine to fail.

**Revised:** The kidney machine failed because of negligent hospital workers.

**Teaching Tip:** Stress going from “Negligence” (noun) to “Negligent” (adjective) and going from “failure” (noun) to “fail” (verb).

4.  Mercy Hospital made a decision to expand its geriatric facilities.

**Revised:** Mercy Hospital made a decided to expand its geriatric facilities.

**Teaching Tip:** The key to this simple sentence is to go from “decision” (a noun) to “decided” (a verb).

5. It was the intention of the screening committee to interview all candidates face to face.

**Revised:** The screening committee intended to interview all candidates face to face.

Teaching Tip: We go from “intention” (a noun) to “intend” (a verb). In this example, it may be useful to suggest a change of tense, from past to present.

**Revised:** The screening committee intends to interview all candidates face to face.

6. The investor made an incorrect assumption about the volatility of Brazil’s emerging economy. (Some information might be missing in the original sentence. Did the investor think that the volatility of Brazil’s emerging economy was high or low? How can the meaning be made clearer?)

**Revised:** The investor incorrectly assumed the high volatility of Brazil’s emerging economy.

**Teaching Tip**: The key to this sentence is to take the nominalization “assumption” and turn it into a verb “assumed.” Stress to the students that they must stay in the same tense (“made” is past tense, so “assumed” should also be in past tense).

The word “high” clarifies what the investor means.

7. The parole board did not give an explanation for the early release of such a dangerous inmate.

**Revised:** The parole board did not explain the early release of such a dangerous inmate.

**Teaching Tip:** We go from “explanation” (noun) to “explain” (verb). In doing so, the resulting syntax forces us to convert a prepositional phrase (for the early release) to a simple noun as a direct object (early release).

**Teaching Tip**: Some students may write,

**Revised:** The parole board did not explain why such a dangerous inmate was released early.

This is good logic, because the student has gone from a nominalization (release) to a verb (release). Reward a student who does this.

8. It is my hope that you apply this material.

**Revised:** I hope that you apply this material.

**Teaching Tip:** We went from 9 words to 7; we made the agent (I) the subject, and we converted a noun “hope” to the main verb “hope.” This sentence allows students to see that sometimes a verb form differs from a noun form by its use in a sentence.

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